

Book Review

Title: *Obeah, Orisa & Religious Identity in Trinidad Africana Nations and the Power of Black Sacred Imagination* (Pp.1-254)

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The gods are not a single transcendent entity analogous to a Western projection of personhood with a bounded identity and delimited personality, but always a multiplicity of effect¹

First, the coming-into-being of the seminal treatise *Obeah, Orisa & Religious Identity in Trinidad: Africana Nations & the Power of Black Sacred Imagination* is worth remarking right from the outset. This is to indicate the status of the text as a complement in ‘a two-phase’ scholarly exploration of the historical evolution of Trinidad in which cultural ‘heritage love’, as Stewart puts it, (246) paved the way for Trinidad’s struggle for spiritual, material and intellectual emancipation and sustained the achievements thereupon. Tracey Hucks and Dianne Stewart wrote separately volumes I and II on the evolution under the following titles respectively: *Obeah, Orisa & Religious Identity in Trinidad: Africa in the White Colonial Imagination* and *Obeah, Orisa & Religious Identity in Trinidad: Africana Nations & the Power of Black Sacred Imagination*. If the former inundates a reader with accounts and a series of archival evidence of the thorny trajectory of the emancipation journey, the latter is an exhilarating account of the gains of the struggles, and national as well as global impact of the successes recorded. Stewart’s study is also a memorialization of key actors and actions which constituted the human and intellectual components of the struggles. The pride of place won for the African cultural heritage in the course of Trinidad’s sociocultural evolution is a keynote which a worthwhile assessment of Stewart’s study must never miss out. The definitive point in the milestone attained is the Africana religion by which Trinidad is set apart as a locale of dense and enduring spiritual consciousness – a site of social contestations fed by historical contradictions, cultural negotiations and intellectual formulations. Orisa practice emerged out of

¹Steven M. Friedson. *Remains of Rituals: Northern Gods in a Southern Land*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009, P. 34.

struggles against colonial repression and denigration of Obeah spiritual practice to become the most visible spiritual tradition in Trinidad and Tobago. Again, *ab initio*, it is important to note that Stewart intermittently theorizes conditions of the mind, state of existence and spiritual involvements of colonial and post-emancipation Trinidadians. The following instantiates this:

Through communication with *nation* deities, who visited their worshipping families by manifesting in the bodies of their devotees, *nation* members simultaneously condensed and expanded time and space, circumventing fictions and binaries of the colonial imaginary, and addressed, if not redressed, the otherness of their condition. Although not untroubled by the power dynamics and conflicts that qualify the daily life of all institutions, these affective achievements have sustained African diaspora religious communities across centuries (20)

Since the very interesting subject of Trinidad's socio-cultural evolution has earlier been broached in two separate monographs authored by Tracey Hucks and Dianne Stewart, the two subsequently published volumes of which the presently reviewed is one is enough testimony to how familiar the authors are with the terrain in which they worked. This testimony is equally of the mutual efforts of the two scholars which culminated in their treasured treatises. Theirs are, indeed, a co-extensive exploratory experience. However, the outcomes of their efforts, as Stewart affirms, are both expected and unexpected (xiii). The reductive approach to archival documentation and historical reconstruction of Africana spiritual culture in Trinidad which contrasts with the much deeper and insightful readings, discoveries, and gap-filling of both authors exemplifies this antithetical experience. Of course, this would be a strong reason Stewart's like Huck's book illustrates 'conceptual architecture and theoretical justifications for transdisciplinary Africana Religious Studies... as a way forward in twenty-first-century scholarship on African-descended peoples' (xiv). This way, further studies will leverage the immense illumination provided by this volume and its compliment to advance knowledge on Africana religions in the Diaspora generally without any risk of being unduly influenced by categorical information, colonially inspired analytical concepts, and methodological preferences. Hence, the cluster of theory derived from a bridging of 'phenomenology of religion, indigenous hermeneutics, and black affect theory'

which the study applies (xv) is well-placed. Yet, a full account of scholarship on Africana religious practices must take cognizance of remarkable intellectual interventions and investment, even if by default, of such works on Obeah which falls within 1907 and 1914. Melville Herskovits is one author so acknowledged in this regard by Stewart for being the first scholar to document the association between the Yoruba deity, Shango, and the Catholic saint, John the Baptist in Trinidad (24-25).

Hucks' and Stewart's simultaneously conducted studies and published treatises focus on the same broad subject of Trinidadian sociocultural evolution from two different but related standpoints. Despite that two standpoints to the same issue are what the reader seems to be presented with, to evaluate each of the texts as a separate scholarly effort is a worthy evaluative approach. No doubt, this would afford a would-be reviewer an opportunity of recognizing efforts and processes of the coming-into-being of each volume in its own right. Adopting this approach might also help to avoid being unduly influenced by knowledge of one while evaluating the other. This way, a focused – more concentrated assessment of the concern, frame of reference and discourse, and import(s) of each – might be more properly determined and possibly used in gauging the frame of mind, depth of thought and objective/subjective attachment each scholar had while engaging with their chosen subject. The whole of this resonates with the fact that every review – at least of this nature – is an evaluative act characterized by selection and exclusion processes which cannot but result in the omission of a relatively large quantum of information.

Indeed, Stewart's study deserves to be made a single focus of assessment. Her treatise explores how 'Yoruba religious cultures' evolved in Trinidad. This phenomenon, she avers, took place within 'two conflicting orders': (1) 'the intimate universe that organized Yoruba people-groups into a unified *nation*, and (2) the long horizon of colonial Obeah. While one might be persuaded to see the orders as 'conflicting' as Stewart seems to do, it might be incorrect to disregard the two orders as a continuity, though a windy trajectory in which Stewart has been able to tease out three epistemic categories of Africana religions: 'colonial obeah, African Obeah, and Orisa' (xvi). In fact, this is what a close reading of the text offers. It is a copious account of ways in which the African cultural heritage has been retained and reprocessed in one of the few places on planet earth where culture has been productively weaponized. Obviously, it is unusually informed by first-hand experiences of African spiritual heritage, thereby serving as a textual space of visibility for authorities on African spiritual tradition as well as archiving of such important voices

which must have been hoped would resonate across generations and serve as an enduring source of inspiration to Diaspora and continental Africans – peoples who have been in constant struggle for a fair consideration as a part of humanity. If it is not, what else could it be other than a polemic on the heroic journey of self-preservation against the odds of alien cultural environment and intentional strategies of denaturalization of the forcefully displaced Africans – today’s black Africans in Trinidad? Stewart names the preservation devices: ‘religion, music, and dance’ – cultural forms with which they built a mechanism for retaining ‘innate possession’ despite that ‘peoples and cultures... are shifting continuities’ (79). Yet, one observes that orisa religious culture is central to a certain cohesion which undergirds the Trinidadian social distinctiveness.

Not only that, the book is a textual field in which the reader encounters interplays of religious/spiritual symbolisms – a textual stage for first-hand attestation to the efficacy of Africana spiritual powers which is capable of confounding a reader and reducing them to either a bewildered or enchanted spectator, or both at once. It therefore cannot be further from the truth that indeed ‘the custodians of the Yoruba-Orisa diaspora traditions [in ‘Trinidad, Brazil, the United States, or elsewhere]... constantly attest to the daily import of ancestral revelation ...coded knowledges only partially translatable and often unintelligible to academics untrained in ancestral modes of communicating’ (186-7). In the conflation of spiritualities and sacred acts that defines the Yoruba aspect of the Trinidadian Africana spiritual life, one mode of understanding which Stewart proposes is never to see the Yoruba orisa practice as syncretic because of its adaptability and inclusivity which allows for ‘*christianisms* in the Yoruba-Orisa tradition’. No doubt, Rudolph Eastman’s preferred terminology – ‘symbolic dualism’ would sit well with Stewart who has allotted a little but significant space to air the view of the coiner of the concept, Baba Rudolph Eastman (72-73). When, therefore, Stewart avers with respect to the ‘*christianisms*’ in Yoruba-Orisa tradition, that a most important concern for her as a scholar of religion is to ‘access the intended metaphorical and metonymic significations in the [syncretic] equation’ (76), a bit more detail ought to be added in our present valuation of Stewart’s account. Indeed, the originary cosmogonic and cosmological frames of reasoning do not give room for such an alien syncretism. Yet, syncretism might apply to a relationship of the originary Yoruba gods and originary ways of relating them to one another, or worshipping them interrelatedly and/or interchangeably. Simply, a syncretic view negates the principle of spiritual ecology of the Yoruba orisa tradition. Indeed, Stewart’s illumination of the significance of metaphor and symbolism in the religious/spiritual construction and understanding of the Trinidadian Yoruba is

an insight that can enrich knowledge of continental Yoruba Orisa religion/spirituality. As Stewart further avers, 'calling the Powers by foreign names enciphers the Orisa's authentic, sacred names and advances a Yoruba ethics of discretion and protection' (77). No part of the Trinidadian cultural history reinforces the foregoing better than the Egbe Onisin Eledumare. The remark of Massetungi on the religious movement which Stewart affords her reader comes to mind here. The religious movement adopts an inclusive method of spiritual practice and growth in a way that the innate African familial disposition to life is allowed to define their spirituality (118-123).

From experience as an Africa-based ritual scholar whose bias is in favour of religious scholarship, an account of Africana-Yoruba spiritual immersion, devotion and level of manifestation of unusual powers inherent in the African spiritual systems which the book provides outweighs any that has been produced on same subject within Africa itself. So is the quantum of insight the book affords on diaspora Africana religion in Trinidad. So also is its insightful juxtaposing of Africana religious practices with their precursors or originary models on the African continent. All of this comes across through a certain level of 'semantic simplicity' (xi) and code-mixing that place the Yoruba language at an advantage in the text's communicative schema.

In accounting for the construction and sustenance of an Africana religious nation of Trinidad, the book catalogues strong affinities between continental Yoruba spiritual heritage and replication of the heritage in the diaspora – specifically Trinidad. If the book foregrounds the roles of individuals in the process of triumphant emergence of the Africana religion in Trinidad, it is but to underscore the compositionality of the orisa community – an interethnic, interreligious and intercultural social formation imbued with emancipatory spirit – and the human resolve that accounted for the evolution of the Africana spiritual tradition. Stewart reads this phenomenon in form of macro nation-building process which exploits to a great advantage culture's psychological, mobilizational, interactive, and integrative potency. Orisa practices in Trinidad, therefore, come across as a tool of national reconstruction deployed along two parallel courses: an orisa spiritual practice that looks inward (within Trinidad) for religio-cultural embellishments and orientation and that which looks outward (Nigerian Yoruba religious space) for same. On this, Stewart observes a 'productive tension' (4) since both enhance the African identity and progress of the Africana religion in Trinidad. Both tendencies in conjunction with the African familial traditions assist in the building of what is termed and foregrounded by Stewart as 'nationscapes' (23).

In regard to the book's account on decolonial politics and, indeed, its verdict on it, an invitation to re-evaluate the concept and ideology of decolonisation is extended particularly to readers who are aware of a book-length de-accentuation of decolonization published the same year Hucks and Stewart did theirs – *Against Decolonisation: Taking African Agency Seriously*. Indeed, the studies of the duo of Hucks and Stewart individually and jointly significantly rekindle the discourse of decolonization. Hence, evaluating Hucks' and Stewart's books against the background of Taiwo's polemics on decolonization might be useful in evaluating the dimension of decolonial discourse by which Stewart's book, in particular, is somewhat considerably enriched. In this wise, it might be particularly interesting to so act because of how the opposing assumptions beneath the joint and complementary studies of Hucks and Stewart provocatively diverge from those of Taiwo's polemics of objection to anything and everything decolonization in so far as it aims beyond attaining political independence. In other words, it might be insightful to look into how decolonization ideology inspired Hucks and Stewart along a direction and Taiwo in a totally opposite direction. If the field of Africana Studies to which African Studies mutually relates is reinforced by the exposition of the former, the latter aims to rupture it from foundation to the superstructure, unapologetically. Both (Hucks and Stewart on the one hand and Taiwo on the other) also differ in terms of fidelity to historical account. The former reconstructs history to assume a kind of alternative history which exposes the weakness and rather intolerable biases of official history from/on colonial Trinidad while the latter makes intermittent allusions to African colonial history and history of Africa post-independence to rationalize his claim that decolonization as a philosophical concept and ideology stands in the way to modernity, which Africa must strive to attain as a matter of urgency. On the contrary, Stewart declares her concern in the book: to explicate 'a necessary analytical and conceptual decolonial turn in Africana religious studies (82). Suppose she does not so declare, the book in every material particular would still come across as an endorsement of decolonial processes in the cultural life of black Africans in Trinidad. Her invention of '*numenym*s' to unveil the insidiousness concealed through colonial conceptual categories that delegitimize sacred acts of the Black Africans in Trinidad underpins her approval of decolonial processes beyond merely targeting political independence as Taiwo proposes. Therefore, her reading of Trinidad's cultural history in terms of inseparability of 'politics and spirituality' (105) would not likely sit well with Taiwo who is a purveyor of anti-decolonisation once and when decolonisation aims beyond political independence for the colonised.

Stewart focuses on symbols, myths, performative acts including rituals, social actions and cultural processes. It is, therefore, very obvious that how religious beliefs mold individuals' thoughts and perceptions amidst life's vicissitude is central to her studies as a scholar of religion. Taken alongside Hucks' account, a very fertile field for interdisciplinary, diversified methodological and transcontinental approaches to the black African studies generally, and black Africa religious studies in particular, are being opened up. This volume attests to many new epistemic possibilities, one of which is what may be described as authorship in related or one continuous scholarship and self-evident collaborative studies. It is significant that this characterizes a robust seminal work in a field that has waited for long for full engagement with the scholarly opportunities it copiously offers. It is also a keynote of the volume that availability/access to resourceful centers of knowledge preservation, production and incubation as well as custodians of cultural memories and experienced researcher are helpful to the kind of field-based research that produced this book. This is in addition to the opportunity of being in environments conducive for thoughtfulness, which afforded the author the needed conversations and access to hands that were willing to help. This is the message the terms 'collegiality' and 'congeniality' (xxiii) should echo in the reader of the volume. When Stewart therefore discloses in the acknowledgements that her book had incubated for long, and that she contended with keeping within required word-count, one should sense how working in a fertile uncultivated field and submitting oneself (as a researcher) faithfully to the drift of the kind of marvelous field of knowledge and viable research idea that culminated in her seminal volume in *Africana Religious studies* and *Black African studies* in general can be. Stewart's study on *Africana* religion, black religious imagination and *Africana* sacred poetics is conducted within the Trinidadian nation context, but speaks to *Africana*, African and diaspora black religious consciousness in thought-provoking and illuminating ways. Continental Yoruba cultural influences on Yoruba Trinidadians is at the heart of her study because, as she reports in the volume, scholarship on cultural realities in the African diaspora has failed to pay attention to this, and the way the archive has been silent (71-72) on this important cultural condition should accentuate the need for intervention in this respect. Stewart's intervention in this regard is by all standards significant. Often, scholars are constrained to observe the limits of valorization so as to succeed in conducting a non-biased study. What this actually means is contentious. Through Stewart's thoughts there seems to be lots to benefit from research focused on 'affective modes', for she predicts for

our next line of research that should a scholarly approach would help to make a big difference.

Work Cited

Friedson, Steven M. 2009. *Remains of Rituals: Northern Gods in a Southern Land*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Stewart, Dianne. 2022. *Obeah, Orisa & Religious Identity in Trinidad Africana Nations and the Power of Black Sacred Imagination Volume II*. Durham: Duke University Press.